

February 21, 1010
Sunday of Orthodoxy

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

What should be said about the authorship of the Book of Samuel? The very name of the work, *Samuel*, is related (whether by cause or effect) to the rabbinical tradition ascribing its authorship to that prophet (*Baba Bathra* 14b). While it is not implausible that some facts in the book, especially those related to the prophet himself, were transmitted by Samuel, it is hardly possible that the whole work, covering a period ending in 961 B.C., could derive very much of its material from a person who died nearly fifty years earlier.

In fact, the manifest purpose of the Book of Samuel reflects the concerns of the period immediately after David---namely, the reign of his son Solomon (961-922). The anonymous author, who is best understood, I believe, to be a court historian during Solomon's reign, manifestly had in mind to narrate the providential rise of David to the throne of Israel and to justify the theological legitimacy of the Davidic dynasty. This is the thesis of the book.

The author, in order to do this, first laid the story's groundwork by describing the end of the era of the Judges and the transition to the monarchy under Saul. Accordingly, he was obliged to explain why the house of Saul had been rejected. The author's intention, in other words, was burdened with a strong apologetic message.

At the same time, the author of Samuel did not suppress the sources opposed to his own argument. For example, he honestly narrated the final speech of Samuel, in which the prophet made no secret of his misgivings about Israel's transition to monarchy (1 Samuel 7: 1-8:22). Thus, Samuel the prophet, appointed to anoint Israel's first two kings, became the voice of caution with respect to the very institution of kingship. (The fact that Samuel's is a voice contrary to the author's thesis is a strong argument against Samuel's authorship.)

The author's style is that of an omniscient storyteller, someone familiar with, not only the thoughts of men (1 Samuel 18: 17), but also the intentions of God (1 Samuel 14:6-10; 16:14; 26:12).

At the same time, nonetheless, this omniscient narrator refrains from rendering moral judgments that do not advance his purpose. Apart from that purpose, he permits ambiguous situations to remain ambiguous. We observe, for instance, his reticence about Ishbosheth's indictment against Abner (2 Samuel 3: 7-8). The author may or may not have known the truth of the accusation. Since, however, the answer to that question was quite incidental to the theology of

the narrative, he did not address it.

One can arguably discern earlier literary sources in the Book of Samuel. Since we know Samuel, Nathan, and Gad maintained records of that period (1 Chronicle 29:29), it is possible that the author of our book had recourse to those documents. Moreover, he must have had seen (or heard) firsthand accounts of at least a few of the work's chief *personae*. It is otherwise difficult to explain such vivid descriptions of characters long gone prior to 961: Hannah, Eli, Samuel, Saul, Jonathan, Doeg, and so on. Certain early events, furthermore, such as the Battle of Aphek and the capture of the Ark (1 Samuel 4-6), are told with a color and liveliness unexpected in an author writing so long afterwards.

One feature of the author's style is his fondness for "doubling." Thus, Saul is proclaimed king on two occasions (10:17-24; 11:15), and twice God rejects him (13:14; 15:23). David is introduced to Saul in two completely different settings (1 Samuel 16:14-23; 17:1-18:2). Twice the Ziphites betray David (23:19-28; 26:1-5), and two times he spares Saul's life when it was in his power to slay him (24:1-22; 26:6-25). There are two accounts of Saul's death (1 Samuel 31; 2 Samuel 1).

Because the Hebrew text of Samuel was corrupted in many places, historians long argued for the superiority of the Septuagint Greek. In 1952 this argument was strengthened by the discovery of two partial scrolls of the Hebrew text at Qumran excavations. These are a full millennium older than any Hebrew manuscripts available prior to the mid-twentieth century. The longer of these two fragments, containing 47 of 57 original columns, preserves a text with readings closer to the Septuagint than to our traditional Hebrew copies, the Masoretic text from the Middle Ages.

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